



British Embassy
Prague

**POLICY REPORT FROM THE DISCUSSION
TITLED “REMEMBERING NOVEMBER 1989:
WILL ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES
SHAKE THE SYSTEM AGAIN?”**

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is based on a debate titled **“Remembering November 1989: Will Environmental Challenges Shake the System Again?”**. The introduction defines the main parameters of climate change - global warming, diminishing amounts of snow and ice, rising sea levels and increasing concentration of greenhouse gases. The next part of the report summarizes the main topics of the debate, such as similarities and contrasts

of the Velvet Revolution and today’s wave of support for environmental issues, growing public engagement and progress in addressing the climate crisis. It also summarizes the main identified problems and proposed solutions. Finally, based on the conclusions of the discussion, the report offers recommendations and possible further steps in the field of economics, politics and society to address the climate crisis.

2. INTRODUCTION – TOPIC SUMMARY

Environmental protection, together with democracy and respect for human rights, was one of the demands of the Velvet Revolution¹ and remained one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century. **The warming of the climate system is indubitable and many of the observed changes are unprecedented. These changes include warming of the atmosphere and ocean, diminishing amounts of snow and ice, rising sea levels and increasing concentration of greenhouse gases.**² Since 2001, 19 of the 20 warmest years on record occurred, with the exception of 1998. Arctic sea ice is now declining at a rate of 13.1 percent per decade and land ice sheets in both Antarctica and Greenland have been losing mass at a rate of 428 billion metric tons per year since 2002.³ While in 1989, the concentration of carbon dioxide, the heat-trapping greenhouse gas, in the atmosphere was at the level of 353 ppm, in 2020 it reached 414 ppm.⁴

However, since 1989, changes in the approach to environmental protection have taken place, unprecedented agreements have been concluded at the international level, and the topic of the environment has become the focus of attention for politicians and the public, especially young people. These and other aspects of the topic were discussed in the **debate which was held on November 17, 2020 as part of the**

Festival of Democracy and in cooperation with the British Embassy in Prague. The following participants took part in the discussion: Anna Gumplová, Bedřich Moldan, Steve Crawshaw, Ralf Fücks, Arzu Geybull.

Recording of the debate is available [here](#).

“There were many people at that time who said: nothing can change, we were born into the system, we will die under this system. And actually, people said no, we can confront that. I think that has importance for us today.”



Steve Crawshaw

¹ OECD, OECD Environmental Performance Reviews: Czech Republic 1999 (Paris: OECD Publishing, 1999): 197.

² IPCC, Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, R.K. Pachauri and L.A. Meyer (eds.)]. (Geneva: IPCC, 2014): 2.

³ “Global Climate Change,” NASA, <https://climate.nasa.gov/>.

⁴ “Climate Change: Atmospheric Carbon Dioxide,” NOAA Climate, <https://www.climate.gov/news-features/understanding-climate/climate-change-atmospheric-carbon-dioxide>.

3. SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION

3.1 MAIN TOPICS

One of the main topics of discussion were the similarities and contrasts of the Velvet Revolution and today's wave of support for environmental issues. **When we look at the revolution in 1989, its environmental part was led by a young student. Nowadays, the involvement of young people striving for a change in the approach to climate protection, is also increasing.** Another similar feature is the persisting pessimism in part of then and now society stemming from the feeling that the system cannot be changed by individual activity.

“Those days in Prague 31 years ago remain for me as some of the most memorable in my whole life and one of the things that made it so memorable was the challenging of something which seemed that until then had been completely unchallengeable. I think there are lessons from that for environmental themes as well things which seem impossible to change. What we need is determination.”



Steve Crawshaw

Unlike more than 31 years ago, it is now virtually impossible for politicians to ignore or even question the climate crisis, precisely because of the growing public engagement. In the era of communist Czechoslovakia, the interest was motivated mainly by the fact that the deterioration of the environment directly threatened the health of the population, resulting in protests of a local nature. Nowadays the movement at the global level is also becoming stronger.

Another important topic of discussion was the development of an approach to tackling the climate crisis. Since 1989, significant changes have taken place. The climate used to be a very marginal topic of public and political debate, but gradually became the focus of attention. The general public awareness in this area also increased due to the education, scientific research and amount of information available.

“I was one of the chairpersons of the Green Party in Western Germany and we had been running in the national elections in 1990 and our slogan was: Everybody is talking about the reunification of Germany, we are talking about climate. And we felt extremely progressive and avant-gardistic in pushing climate change at the center of our political agenda.”



Ralf Fücks

We have also made progress in the area of international cooperation. In 2015, the Paris Climate Agreement, which aims to keep a global temperature rise this century well below 2 °C above pre-industrial levels, was adopted. It is considered to be a notable step forward despite the fact that we have not yet achieved the implementation of the obligations arising from the treaty into our political and economic systems. Another set of policy initiatives is the European Green Deal presented in 2019, under which the European continent is to become climate neutral by 2050. The European Union has already made progress towards meeting its energy efficiency targets, greenhouse gas emissions have been reduced by more than 20% since 1990 and the share of renewable energy sources has increased.

3.2 MAIN IDENTIFIED PROBLEMS

Since 1990, environmental degradation has deepened. Two main problems were defined at the global level that we fail to address despite visions and commitments – the global environmental crisis and the biodiversity crisis. Although we have been largely successful in solving most local environmental problems, too many people still die prematurely because of air pollution. Due to lack of political power capable of bringing about change at the global level, we are not moving forward fast enough in order to find a solution.

“I think we are not getting somewhere as fast as we need to. What we lack are the actions, the political actions or the political power which would really say: yes, this is the issue and we need to deal with it and we need that globally.”



Anna Gumplová

The industrial society is based on fossil fuels – coal, oil and natural gas. **Although fossil fuels have begun to recede into the background, the transformation of society as a whole cannot be done in one year. A lot of effort, creativity and especially investment is needed.** But as we can currently observe across European and Asian countries, compared to the amount of money earmarked for restarting the economies affected by the coronavirus crisis, the amount of money earmarked for new energies and climate crisis measures is very small.

One of the challenges is also that not everyone feels that the problem of the climate crisis applies to them. Some people feel that others should do something about it, but they will not adapt own behavior. Those people often think in a very narrow sense, not realizing that their behavior will have consequences for future generations and their lives.

3.3 MAIN IDENTIFIED SOLUTIONS/WAYS FORWARD

During the debate, solutions to defined problems were also outlined. To achieve a successful ecological transition, we need investments in redesigning the transport system, the energy system, industrial production and urban development. This requires a growing, functioning economy. **We should therefore overcome the false dichotomies between environmental protection and economic growth, linking the economic prosperity of billions of people with environmental safety.** We should not only rely on already concluded international agreements, but also actively make sure whether their targets are really implemented in the economy and energy policy. International cooperation is very important in tackling climate change.

The young generation will be most affected by climate change in the future. Therefore, young people should be given more space to express their views and participate in decisions on economic development and climate protection priorities.

“I am personally somehow involved in the Czech chapter of the Fridays for Future and I think that these young people are very much committed, and I hope they will gain more influence in the near future. And here is one ray of hope.”



Bedřich Moldan

A lesson needs to be learned from the 1989 revolution, when part of society was pessimistic about changing the system at the time. We need to join forces in favor of taking unprecedented measures to protect the climate. One of the solutions is to change the way we speak about the climate crisis. We should see it as an opportunity to make progress towards a new industrial revolution in which fossil fuels are replaced by renewable energies. Millions of people working in fossil fuel-based industries need to be taken into account and presented with a credible vision of the future. A plan in which climate protection will lead not to the destruction of industrial society but to its transformation into a more intelligent and smarter version capable of operating in cooperation with nature.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Climate change has already begun and will continue to affect future generations. Even if we stop emitting all greenhouse gases today, it will not reverse this process. The question is whether we will be able to slow down climate change and avoid the darkest scenarios of the future. Climate change is one of the most complex problems we face, as it involves, among other sectors, economics, society and politics.⁵

4.1 ECONOMICS

At the economic level, investment in the development of technologies and clean and sustainable energy is the most important, as current energy accounts for over two-thirds of global greenhouse gas emissions.

To avoid a dramatic rise in global temperature, we must reduce emissions to zero within a few decades. We need new technologies to decarbonise sectors where it is difficult to reduce emissions, such as shipping, trucks, aviation, heavy industries and agriculture. We should therefore learn from post-crisis developments in 2008, when economic recovery resulted in the largest increase in emissions in history and take advantage of governments' ambitious pandemic recovery plans to drive much more investment in key energy technologies.⁶

4.2 SOCIETY

Vulnerability to climate change and greenhouse gases emissions are influenced by livelihoods, lifestyles, behavior and culture.⁷ It is important that every individual in society is aware of this and behaves accordingly with respect for the environment. Part of society still does not believe in the possibility of reversing or slowing down climate change. We should therefore try to convince this part of society that changing our behavior in favor of future generations makes sense.

4.3 POLITICS

Politicians and governments have a critical role in promoting climate protection measures. That is why we, as a society, should show that we care about solving the climate crisis and not give politicians the opportunity

to downplay or ignore the problem. **The climate crisis should be one of the key points on the political agenda at both the local and global levels. As we have seen in tackling the coronavirus crisis, cross-border problems require global cooperation.** States should therefore build on previous agreements on climate change mitigation and ensure that their objectives are met.



Anna Gumplová
Politician & Activist



Bedřich Moldan
Ecologist, Publicist & Politician



Steve Crawshaw
Policy & Advocacy Director, Freedom from Torture



Ralf Fücks
Director, Center for Liberal Modernity



Arzu Geybullá
Columnist, Blogger & Journalist

⁵ "Responding to Climate Change," NASA, <https://climate.nasa.gov/solutions/adaptation-mitigation/>.

⁶ "Energy is at the heart of the solution to the climate challenge," IPCC, <https://www.ipcc.ch/2020/07/31/energy-climatechallenge/>

⁷ IPCC, Climate Change 2014: Synthesis Report. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [Core Writing Team, R.K. Pachauri and L.A. Meyer (eds.)]. (Geneva: IPCC, 2014): 26.

NEXT STEPS:

- Ensuring access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy
- Promoting sustainable industrialization and efficient use of resources
- Ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns which include decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation and promoting sustainable lifestyles
- Promoting inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment and decent work for all in connection with the restructuring of fossil fuel-based sectors
- Taking urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts,⁸ cooperate globally in solving cross-border problems and monitoring compliance with the objectives of international agreements
- Investing in educational programs to increase understanding about sustainable consumption and production practices
- Ensuring the stability of institutions and a transparent system of democratic governance that listens to the views and concerns of the young generation when taking the necessary steps to protect the climate

The effective solution of climate change, as well as other growing environmental challenges, goes hand-in-hand with a transparent system of democratic governance and with simultaneously addressing the connected socio-economic issues. The Forum 2000 Foundation aims to continue and deepen its focus on this vital topic.

⁸ "17 Goals to Transform Our World," The Sustainable Development Agenda of the United Nations, <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>.



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